

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Contact:

*Judith Ingram, Communications Director,
(202) 523-3240, ext. 127*

WASHINGTON-The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom is gravely concerned over the recent introduction of martial law by President Pervez Musharraf, an act that damages the legitimacy of his government and seriously threatens the future of democracy in Pakistan. President Musharraf contends that the suspension of democratic procedures and the country's constitution was due to the dangers posed by religious extremists. Yet in having arrested judges and lawyers, human rights activists, journalists, and other leaders of civil society in Pakistan, and in disbanding the Supreme Court and independent judiciary, he has demonstrated his willingness to silence Pakistan's democratic debate under the guise of security considerations-especially when voiced by those who speak out against the very extremism he claims to be combating-and severely undermined the rule of law. Equally troubling, at the same time as democratic institutions have been quashed, Musharraf has released a group of people being held on charges of extremism and terrorism.

"Musharraf's actions have imperiled the few human rights protections that did exist in Pakistan," said Commission Chair Michael Cromartie. "Together with his previous policies that served to bolster the influence of Islamist extremist groups, the current suspension of the Constitution, dismissal of the Supreme Court justices, curbs on media, and mass detentions will undermine further the right to freedom of religion or belief in that country." The Commission calls on the U.S. government to protest the imposition of martial law and suspension of the constitution in Pakistan and to insist that the Musharraf government release all of Pakistan's imprisoned and detained civil society leaders, some of whom have been freed since their initial detention.

The Commission has raised concerns in the past that the Musharraf government's political alliance with militant religious parties in Pakistan-in spite of Musharraf's routine anti-extremist proclamations-has served to strengthen the institutional bases of support in both state and society. The Pakistani government's anti-democratic and anti-rule of law actions, which have

not been aimed at members of extremist parties, appear only to be reinforcing, both directly and indirectly, his tacit support for these extremist groups.

The continued influence of militant groups in Pakistani politics and society has severely compromised rule of law and human rights for Pakistan's citizens, and has been particularly problematic when it comes to the internationally guaranteed rights to freedom of religion, expression, and association. Virtually all of the country's severe religious freedom problems-including the country's blasphemy laws, the laws violating the fundamental rights of the Ahmadi community, the persistent sectarian violence targeting Shi'as, Ahmadis, Hindus, and Christians, and the Hudood ordinances, which violate the rights of women in Pakistan-were initiated or are exacerbated by religious militant groups by virtue of their representation in parliament, penetration of the state security services and police force, and through pressure on the judiciary. Religious parties have vehemently opposed the limited attempts by the government of Pakistan to address these concerns or amend the offending laws; because of the Musharraf government's dependence on those groups, he has consistently yielded to their demands regardless of the negative impact on the rights and freedoms of other Pakistanis.

The government of Pakistan has also extended its undemocratic practices-and its efforts to appease religious extremists-into the international arena. In March 2007, Pakistan again presented a resolution at the UN's new Human Rights Council in Geneva supporting measures to halt the so-called "defamation of religions." The backers of the resolution claim that their aim is to promote religious tolerance, but in practice, such laws routinely criminalize and prosecute what is deemed-often capriciously by local officials in countries where such laws exist-to be "offensive" or "unacceptable" speech about a particular religion. Defamation of religion laws clearly violate principles outlined in international human rights instruments, which guarantee the right to freedom of expression, as well as freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. Moreover, they appear to grant rights to entire religions rather than to individuals. Regrettably, the resolution again passed the Council.

"President Musharraf should be called to account for his actions against democracy and human rights, including religious freedom, in Pakistan," Cromartie said, "actions that likely will enable extremist religious forces to continue to manipulate the political process."

The Commission calls on the U.S. government to urge the government of Pakistan to make much more serious efforts to combat extremism, noting especially the government's political alliance with Islamist political parties, which has simultaneously afforded them an inordinate amount of influence and had a strong negative impact on religious freedom in Pakistan. The Commission also calls on the U.S. government to continue pressing Musharraf to comply with

Pakistan's democratic and constitutional norms, by restoring the disbanded Supreme Court and independent judiciary-two necessary preconditions for holding free and fair elections-and ending his simultaneous tenure as general and president. These important steps are needed to implement genuine democracy and rule of law in Pakistan, which are needed to protect human rights including religious freedom.

The Commission recently went on record deploring the placing of Asma Jahangir, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Freedom of Religion or Belief, under house arrest and calling on the U.S. government, at the highest levels, to protest Ms. Jahangir's detention and to urge the government of Pakistan to release her immediately so that she may continue her work. Ms. Jahangir's detention order was lifted on Friday, Nov. 16. She is about to depart Pakistan to conduct a UN investigation into religious freedom in Angola, in accordance with her UN mandate.

The Commission on International Religious Freedom, a bipartisan, independent federal body, is mandated by Congress to monitor abuse of freedom of religion or belief and related human rights around the world and to make recommendations to the President, State Department and Congress on ways to address religious freedom concerns. A full list of the Commission's recommendations on Pakistan can be found in the 2007 Annual Report (www.uscifr.gov).

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and the Congress.

Michael Cromartie